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FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI
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INFO RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0636
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000169

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/19/2017

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SUBJECT: BURMA ACTIVISTS CITE NEED TO "CREATE SPACE" FOR
PRO-DEMOCRACY OPPOSITION TO REGROUP

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CLASSIFIED BY: Michael K. Morrow, Consul General, Chiang Mai,
DoS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) The outside world needs to create space for pro-democracy forces inside Burma to recover and rise up again, visiting DCM was told by Chiang Mai-based Burma activists. Specifically, high-level personal diplomacy must maintain pressure on regime leaders to ease the brutal crackdown, and concerted international efforts should be made to document and track political detainees. These measures can give opposition activists the sense of "political space" and personal safety they need to resume their push for democracy. Our contacts urged the outside world to be mindful that the Burmese military, despite low morale and growing recruiting problems, is held together by the twin beliefs that: (a) it is the country's only unifying force; and (b) if it relinquishes power, its leaders will be punished for war crimes. During this meeting we were struck by our contacts' focus on the needs of those inside Burma rather than on exile groups' own roles and actions. End Summary.

Personal Pressure Better Than Sanctions

¶2. (C) Visiting Deputy Chief of Mission met over lunch October 18 with four northern Thailand-based Burma activists (protect all). "Irrawaddy" Editor Aung Zaw made the case that the pro-democracy movement inside Burma, despite being on the defensive for now, has irrevocably changed the country's political situation and there is no going back to business as usual. To succeed, however, the opposition needs political space to recover and rise again. The international community can help create this space by pressuring the regime to ease its heavy-handed tactics and by taking steps to give pro-democracy activists the sense of relative safety they need to regroup.

¶3. (C) This can be accomplished in two ways, Aung Zaw said:

-- High-level personal diplomacy. Regime leaders are somewhat

responsive to direct, personal approaches by prominent global figures such as Laura Bush, UNSYG Moon, and UN Special Envoy Gambari. Aung Zaw opined that this type of pressure, along with widespread global media coverage of the demonstrations, probably limited the severity of the regime's crackdown compared to the last major uprising in 1988, at least in terms of the number of people killed. Economic sanctions on the other hand, while appreciated for the symbolic value, do little or nothing to alter regime behavior, Aung Zaw said.

-- Documenting and tracking political detainees. Aung Zaw and the other activists said many opposition figures inside Burma who are not already jailed are afraid to come out. They called for concerted international efforts to document, track, and freely visit all political detainees, as an important way of letting them (and the regime) know they are not forgotten.

Burmese Military: Discouraged And Understaffed, But Still Unified

¶4. (C) A growing number of Burmese military units are undermanned due to low morale and recruiting difficulties, reported Karen National Union Central Executive Committee member Isaac Po and former 88 Generation leader Win Min. They cited anecdotal reports that morale among officers had taken a beating since the recent crackdown - in some cases getting grief from immediate family members for their actions against monk-led protests. Despite this, they said the military is held together by:

-- a widely held belief that the military is the only unifying force in a Burma that has long been beset by continuous infighting among people of various ethnicities, religions and ideologies; and

-- a widely held fear that relinquishing power would result in immediate war crimes prosecutions and punishments for other

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human rights violations.

-- fanciful supposition among some military elements that Burma faces a threat of foreign invasion from the United States and its regional allies.

¶5. (C) The number of known desertions by Burmese military personnel is quite small, our contacts said. They commented that previously reported mutinies in the Burmese military during the height of the crackdown could more accurately be described as inconsistent responses by field commanders to unclear military orders. Field commanders were reportedly instructed orally - not in writing -- to stop demonstrations by whatever means they saw fit. Some understood this to mean shoot-to-kill, while others used blockades and other less harsh tactics. The result was a variety of tactics used by different military leaders to halt the demonstrations - not mutinies.

Should The Opposition Leverage Ethnic Minorities?

¶6. (C) Win Min argued that the pro-democracy forces should be talking to and soliciting support from Burma's armed ethnic groups to create a larger military threat to the regime. However, Aung Zaw responded that attempting to pool support from the ethnic groups would only unify and mobilize the military more. The KNU's Isaac Po agreed, noting that in any case the ethnic military groups were defensive forces and had no real offensive capability (an opinion shared, for example, by the Free Burma Rangers, an NGO that provides humanitarian and logistics support to ethnic groups in Burma).

Economy Worsens, Hatred Grows

17. (C) A notable difference between the current situation and the crackdown in 1988 is the widespread and growing hatred among the Burmese people toward the military regime, our contacts observed. They cited this as a major reason why a political line has been crossed and there is no going back. An exacerbating factor is the significant worsening of the country's economy in the past three to six months. Burma Foreign Affairs Training Program Coordinator Christina Fink said as economic hardship grows in Burma, the threat of a flood of economic migrants into Thailand is of far greater concern than that of Burmese political refugees. Yet all our contacts acknowledged that current Burmese Army deployments across the country make flight to Thailand difficult and perilous.

Comment

18. (C) We were struck by our contacts' focus on the needs of those inside Burma rather than on exile groups' own roles and actions. We also sensed the northern Thailand-based activists were less despondent than they had been in the immediate aftermath of the crackdown, and seemed more intent on girding for what they believe will be many more rounds in the pro-democracy struggle. Their message to us was clear: urging specific actions by the international community to create some breathing space for the pro-democracy movement to recover and rise again.

19. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Rangoon and cleared by Bangkok DCM.
MORROW